



# Bombs and Books

## Building a Better Air Force Military Acquirer

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The Air Force (AF) develops some of the premier military business professionals in the world—but it can do even better. It has to if its next generation of leaders is expected to effectively navigate the ever-evolving defense acquisition landscape while simultaneously ensuring the materiel readiness of the force. The notion that the AF, and the Department of Defense (DoD), should invest in the professionalism of its workforce is widely discussed and seldom criticized. Examples of recent deliberation are easy to find.

Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Frank Kendall's 2013 Better Buying Power initiative (2.0) explicitly added "improving the professionalism of the total acquisition workforce" as one of the initiative's six main tenets. A recent Center for a New American Security (CNAS) report suggested that a separate career track be developed exclusively to incubate the most promising military business professionals. Even recent congressional testimony on the state of acquisition reform stressed the need for a skilled defense acquisition workforce. There is no doubt that enhancing the acquisition profession through personnel development is a DoD priority. The development of military acquirers, with their recognizably unique status, should be no exception.

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The military acquisition official is a unique breed of officer with responsibilities to be both savvy in the art of war and schooled in business, science, and engineering. He or she should be comfortable with both bombs and books. Methodologies on how to develop these officers vary across the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines, but on average the Services seek a breadth of responsibilities for those tasked with increasing business responsibilities. The AF assigns acquisition officers beginning as second lieutenants and accesses others later in their careers who indicate a talent for the work. Frankly, the Service does an excellent job of managing its senior officers' acquisition assignments and produces some pretty impressive results, but do the officers chosen to manage the most challenging

## Experience

Background in a military career field outside of acquisition helps an officer establish the AF "Why." In his seminal work "Start with Why," Simon Sinek extols the value of understanding the core reason for one's profession. All AF airmen, regardless of career field, should know and have a visceral belief in that reason. So the question is posed: Do all AF acquirers know "Why" the work they are doing for the AF is important?

Good leadership can and does inspire young acquisition officers to look beyond their immediate tasks to understand the bigger AF picture. However, it often isn't leadership, but unique experience that shapes an officer's view of his or her role in the

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and important programs in the AF have the right skills to run the programs to which they are assigned?

After a critical look at three aspects of a career AF acquisition officer's development, the authors make three recommendations for improvement.

First, the current early career experience of dedicated AF acquirers is varied and inconsistent, often failing to instill the "Why" of the AF in its youngest officers. "Why" an AF acquirer is doing what he or she is doing for the AF should be just as clear to the young acquisition officer as it is to the pilot.

Next, it is also becoming increasingly apparent that it is not just the defense acquisition system with which an officer must be familiar, but the business world as a whole. Recent missteps in federal business system acquisitions have provided harsh reminders of the risks associated with technology development, regardless of their genesis in the public or private sectors.

Finally, the current acquisition certification program ensures a community of knowledge across defense acquisitions but fails to connect the officer with the broader professional worlds of program management and engineering. The benefits of grooming an officer by way of civilian professional certification should not be overlooked.

The AF attracts many talented young officers with the potential to become tomorrow's acquisition leaders. The goal is to develop as many as possible with the skills necessary to manage the most demanding programs. The AF can produce better military acquisition officers by implementing changes to experience, education and certification opportunities.

AF mission. That unique experience for acquisition officers, outside of formal developmental education opportunities, often is achieved through operational exchange assignments, deployments or a combination of both.

Unfortunately, acquisition officer deployment opportunities tend to ebb and flow with conventional force operational tempo. Deployments are a great way to connect the acquisition officer with the user community, but they alone cannot be counted on to inspire a program manager to get the right product to field on time and within budget. Operational exchanges offer an officer the opportunity to become immersed in an AF career field dependent on acquisitions to perform its function. Intelligence, maintenance and space operations units know their "Why." Not all acquisition officers experience the perspective-changing activities that occur in operational units. They should.

### **Recommendation No. 1:** Mandate an operational exchange tour for all AF acquisition officers.

Mandating operational exchanges for acquisition officers would instill a baseline of AF core knowledge across the career field. Though it has organizational and management challenges, the idea of an operationally grounded acquisition officer corps is a step toward improving the career field.

## Education

The education of an AF acquirer should extend beyond the bounds of the defense acquisition community. Currently, AF acquisition officer professional education consists of a basic in-residence class followed by on-the-job training and numerous resident/correspondence courses offered by Defense

Acquisition University (DAU). This is a good process, but it is decidedly DoD-centric. Acquisition is an international business function, one arguably not confined to the tenets of the defense acquisition system.

While it makes sense to ground acquisition professionals in defense principles, it is important to consider the value of building knowledge through additional education. Often that additional education comes in the form of an advanced academic degree (AAD) pursued part-time in addition to military duties or full-time at an in-residence setting. There are many excellent AAD opportunities, allowing the vast majority of acquisition officers to achieve degrees in business, systems engineering, engineering or related academic fields. The current in-residence AAD options for AF acquisition officer strongly focus on engineering. This ultimately produces a Service acquisition professional who is technically sound but not necessarily educated in commercial best practices or advanced business management techniques. There currently are no opportunities for AF acquisition officers to attend full-time business-specific programs at civilian institutions. One way to augment the current acquisition education framework and introduce business principles common to the private sector is to offer AADs in business management at civilian institutions.

**Recommendation No. 2:** Offer opportunities to attend civilian business schools in residence.

Offering select acquisition officers the opportunity to attend a civilian business school in residence would improve the AF connection with the private sector, ensure continuity with international business practices and incentivize officers to pursue knowledge that ultimately benefits the AF. Though there

the government acquisition professional does not necessarily mirror the contractor counterpart. More to the point, while evaluating companies that can execute our requirements and stay within cost and schedule, the government looks for certain certifications of both individuals and companies. Doesn't it make sense for us to require our workforce to have the same qualifications? This leads to our third recommendation.

**Recommendation No. 3:** Mandate the achievement of a civilian program management professional (PMP) and/or professional engineer (PE) certification.

We propose that upon pinning on the rank of major (O-4), and before the assumption of lieutenant colonel (O-5), there needs to be a requirement, tied to acquisition corp eligibility, to gain either PMP certification or the PE certification.

The PMP and PE are internationally recognized certifications underpinning professional expertise in the program management and engineering career fields. Yes, they cost money to complete and would impose a demand on an officer's time, but they go a long way toward the government confidently owning its technical baseline. Without these bona fides, the government remains somewhat reliant upon the contractor community for programmatic and engineering support. With them, the AF acquisition officer corps could lead business activities well into the future.

## Conclusion

Changes in the experience, education and certification opportunities for AF acquisition officers will yield more personnel with the skills to lead the most demanding AF programs. Experience in the form of a mandatory operational exchange will

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are many questions to be answered about how to fund such a program and the appropriate timing in an officer's career, the fact remains that the AF would benefit from acquisition officers attending top-ranked business schools.

## Certification

DAU currently offers a rather robust defense-specific continuing education curriculum. There is little debate about the value of the present system, as it provides necessary insight into the nuances of defense acquisition. However, the certification of

instill in an acquirer the reason for the work. Education through civilian business schools will ensure a current and relevant connection with industry. Certification in program management or professional engineering will help the AF own its technical baseline. Individually, each of these recommendations has the potential to improve the skills of some AF acquisition officers. Collectively, they can change a whole career field. ☀

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